

the way the water leans by TolkienGirl

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Summary:

There was a time when you were king.

the way the water leans

Your lip splits open again every day for two weeks.

The third week, it heals.

Your mom fusses, she always fusses. Your dad doesn't look up from over his paper.

(You used to know that, about you and Nance. Same parents—the pretty, faded mother with the kind eyes; the father who never says much, never is much. And always with your clasped hands, between kisses, swearing without saying that you will never be like them.)

(Never.)

(You'll never be anything now.)

You're not poetic. You bought the dozen roses and then the world went—well, it went upside down. After that, you stopped trying.

You're not poetic, you don't have the words for it. But it was the right thing to do.

There was a time when you were king. You held court and you held your head up and you held Nancy's heart, at least for a little while.

It wasn't as much fun as people thought it was, but it was yours.

You know it's neither here nor there, not anywhere, really, in the realm of things that *matter*—but you wish you could have kicked Billy's ass, not the other way round.

The first snowfall does wonders for Hawkins. It's late November, and suddenly the rot and ruin is blanketed under white.

You think you're going to go for a run, that's what you mean to do, but instead you end up walking, burning footprints into the slush.

The snow melts after a day.

The mercy of Dustin is this: he never goes away. You keep calling him a little nuisance and a shithead (OK, so maybe you don't mean it), but he asks you to come to the movies with them; he asks you to dinner; he just asks and asks and asks.

And you know that you're pathetic, with all your social cred smashed to bits and your friends a bunch of thirteen-year-olds, but you need them all the same.

You miss her.

You told her it was OK. It wasn't so much true as it was necessary.

But you miss her, you miss kissing the dent in her crooked, perfect smile, you miss her eyes and her laugh and even her disappointment. You miss it because it was for you.

(You miss knowing for certain that you are ever on her mind.)

In the end, you send in applications, but you tell yourself you won't go even if they accept you.

You won't go.

For a second you feel some kind of vertigo, like the demons of Hawkins have opened up the ground again, and you're falling, and then you just feel—

Nothing. You can go, you can stay, but it isn't the end of the world.

Not yet.

You never wanted to be *different*, to be a freak—and maybe you're not. Because there's a little piece of you in all of them. You know what it's like to care and not care, you know what it's like to want to rule—if not the world, then even the smallest of kingdoms.

You're not poetic, and you don't tell them that they shouldn't try to be like you.

Actually, the opposite.

Because the Steve that Dustin believes in is much, much more than the Steve that *is*—just like the Steve that Nancy thought she loved, the Steve that people cheered for, the Steve that came apart between two autumns, two falls.

And the Steve beneath all that is burned like footprints in snow, an absence of purpose met with a sudden rush of duty—

Or something, in not so many words.